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A Letter from Your CMSAF to the Boss

**The follow memo was written
by CMSAF Benken to General
Ryan. It's about you and your concerns
about life in our Air Force today:**

MEMORANDUM FOR GENERAL RYAN
16 Nov 97

SUBJECT: Enlisted Perspective

1. Our current situation is a tale of two decades. The "Steady State '80s" and the "Challenging '90s." Supervisors and commanders are facing challenges much different than any other period in our history. For example:

1980 - 1989

Cold War enemy - President Reagan and the American public convinced the "Evil Empire" had to be contained and a large in-garrison and well equipped force was necessary for battle in the Fulda Gap and ICBM retaliation.

We had few deployments, averaging 3,000 TDY on contingencies at any one time.

Robust manning - few manning issues - plenty of manpower to go around - balance was right between noncommissioned officers and airmen. A MSgt could expect to be elevated to "supervisory" status.



O&M and MILCON money not an issue. We were able to improve office environments, gain lots of computer equipment, make facility improvements.

39 main operating bases overseas - lots of movement in assignments.

No repetitive/unpopular missions like the desert.

1990 to Present

Post cold war era - funding dries up for MILCON improvements etc in overseas areas for a long period of time. Facilities, like dormitories, deteriorate to an unacceptable level.

Drawdown - base closures - unsettled force.

VSI/SSB and early retirement carve out the middle of the force, targeting mid-level NCOs. No SERB for Chiefs. Creates a void in later years of mid level experience, in many career fields there are too many MSgts who now become wrench turners and we begin to rely upon junior personnel to fill the gap for lack of mid level ranks. Experience level drops.

BRAC closes numerous bases - some troops close 2 or 3 bases before becoming "settled."

Outsourcing - perhaps the biggest culprit in present turmoil. The force has little understanding of outsourcing and how far it will go. Nobody wants to be the "last one to be asked to leave" if there are further reductions, and many are scrambling for jobs now. This will have tremendous impact on retention, I believe.

Deployments are now 4 times the pace of the 1980's. Op tempo/Pers Tempo is almost a state of mind. Many can cope, many cannot. Many who signed up in the '80s expected us to have a steady state throughout their entire career. Because we are now 70 percent married (vice

70% single in the '70s), the family becomes more of a factor in today's force. I asked three troops in a dining facility what op tempo meant to them. Here were their individual responses: "I'm single, send me 350 days a year so I can see the world." The second troop said, "I'm a single parent, I don't ever want to go TDY." The third troop said, "90 to 120 days is about right, but I want to go to Istres, France or somewhere like that where the per diem is good!" There is also a lot of "piling on" by personnel at bases that have almost zero op tempo. We have created a monster with this issue, and it's tough to get by it. I sometimes find myself reminding troops of the '70s, when we would send troops on a 15 month tour to the Philippines, Okinawa or Taiwan - then send them 179 days TDY to Vietnam and return for a couple of weeks to their home base - only to be sent 179 days again to Vietnam. At the end of the 15 month tour, you had enough time to process out of your home base and return to the states. When you returned to the states, many were on station for one year and back over to southeast Asia again. We also have it better than our Army counterparts - Bosnia, for instance, is a one year tour for the Army - for us it's 90 to 120 days. After all the effort to reduce op tempo, it's time for the force to recognize that nearly all that can be done, has been done - and let's get on with the mission.

13 main operating bases left overseas - assignments begin to stagnate and troops begin long tenures at stateside bases.

Training becomes a tremendous challenge - having time to train 3 levels, balancing with increasing use of "out of hide" resources for LAN administration, Quality NCOs, etc.

Culture begins to change. We become an "Air Expeditionary Force" - a culture many in the '80s did not sign up to do.

Spare parts begins to become an issue for some weapon systems. Troops begin to "can" more aircraft - face the prospect of being told "it's ok not to be able to fix your aircraft." A concept that violates the maintenance person's fundamental reason for existence - "get the

Retention - it is going south on us. Second term should be viewed as "flashing red lights" for us. Low unemployment on the outside; propensity to want to be with the family all the time; concerns over outsourcing; the perception that we have "erosion of benefits," and a lot of anecdotal misinformation is causing our troops to

leave by the numbers (changes in retirement and implementation of TRICARE are the biggest culprits here). We have also announced the QDR is looming - for many a 26,000 plus cut does not make sense in a force where we are "doing more with less." Many are concerned that our force will be hollowed out - that a tremendous increase of contractors on our bases will change our culture - that the Air Force will lose its "family" environment. They are also concerned that the military members remaining will be the ones constantly tasked for contingencies. They cannot see how the contractors will fold into the process of "going to war." There is lots of concern that we are "moving way too fast" with outsourcing and QDR. Recent comments in the press about using "corporate" processes from the private sector to do business is not a popular concept either.

Technology revolution. This will cause career paths to change as we enter the next century. We were still using the Underwood Five manual typewriter for information processing in 1972 - technology that had not changed since 1947! Today, information superiority is a core competency and is reinventing itself every day. Technology in other areas is changing at the same pace as well.

Budget issues - everywhere we turn these days, we are looking for ways to save money. I believe we must use extreme caution - we are looking far too aggressively at saving dollars in the training arena, for example. Some proposed the return to the "direct duty assignee (DDA) concept - where a troop would report for duty right after basic training. This is a deplorable concept - all troops need the benefit of initial skills training in a tech school environment - not only for the skills training, but for their continued indoctrination into the Air Force. I think we have this turned off, but there will be other pushes to save money in the training area that could cost us in the long run. Formal seven level training is an area where we can save money, but we must use caution here as well, because much of what that was taught in FTDs, etc, has been implemented in the 7 level schools. PME must be preserved - and we need to increase the number of MSgts going to the Senior NCO Academy in the future.

Challenges

Many of our senior NCOs came into the Air Force in the early '80s. They are facing challenges that we could not prepare them for. The steady state of the '80s presented few challenges for the senior NCO or the commander. Today, they are faced with a multitude of issues and frustrations - fed by constant media disconnects and

anecdotal information that is passed from troop to troop. Your NOTAM concept will go far in pushing accurate information down from the top to the troops. (I have also found that pushing information out to the troops gets frustrated by some who “hold information close to the vest.” Information is power, and we have many who hold onto information rather than get it to their troops - we need to make this concept unpopular.) Commanders need to have “commander’s calls” to communicate to their troops.

I also believe that we need to focus on the chain of command. There are too many troops getting into “pen pal” relationships with the SECAF, office of the CSAF, etc. For instance, one troop, frustrated by not getting his career development course on time, wrote the SECAF for assistance. He did not pursue this through his chain of command where there were literally hundreds of people who could have helped. There have been multiple examples of this, and it puts far too much pressure on the Air Staff to respond to trivial issues when they should be working the major ones. I believe we should bounce these things right back to the folks who can deal with them at the lowest level. Of course, when someone cannot find relief, they can always press it upward. Its very frustrating for first sergeants, senior enlisted advisors and commanders to receive issues to work from the top. We need to refocus on the value of the chain of command for working issues for our troops.

Additionally, **it is imperative** that we support our chain of command - that the JA community function as advisors. As was mentioned at a previous Corona, commanders and first sergeants must function in an environment where they can make judgment calls without fear of being overturned by the legal community.

As I talk to the troops, I ask them as leaders to do the following:

- **Focus on the mission** - put the distractions aside and focus on what we are all about. Our mission is to fly and fight - some of the above issues we can do nothing about. Work hard every day to improve your duty section - be positive and optimistic. There is nothing gained by being negative. (My simple message to the troops to merely refocus on our mission was interpreted by the Air Force Times as calling them “selfish.” The word never crossed my lips and I certainly would NEVER call our troops selfish. The editor came to my office and we discussed this approach by the Times for nearly two hours. No matter how hard I try to work with them, however, the approach never seems to change.)

- **Communicate only the facts** - far too much anecdotal information. We put out a fact sheet on benefits for instance, which clears up any misunderstandings about our pay and compensation. NOTAMS and downward push of information will help this effort.

- **Provide continuous feedback** - essential in molding our young troops for the challenges they must meet. Giving “mandatory feedback” twice a year doesn’t hack it. I tell them to give “one minute” feedbacks often. Also helps to diffuse rumors, etc.

- **Encourage innovation** - even in desperate times, the innovation of our force keeps us moving forward. The aircraft generation briefing we saw at Corona is a perfect example of process improvement where troops used innovation to make their job easier - saving time and effort. We need to tell our leaders not to sit back on their heels - to get in the game and work every day to make the Air Force better.

- **Fundamental discipline** - important to remember that everything we needed to know about how to be successful in the Air Force we learned in basic training. How to salute, dress for success, customs and courtesies, how to work as a team and treat each other with dignity and respect. Its all a matter of basics.

- **Set high standards** - I tell our leaders that I can tell within 30 seconds where a unit is setting high standards, mediocre standards or low standards. I can look at the boots and uniforms, look at the posture as they sit in chairs and look at their faces. Many times in a unit where there are low to mediocre standards, the first question or comment will be from a self-serving individual - not from a team perspective or “how can we help improve our Air Force.” And almost typically, the individuals in the unit will reflect that attitude and unfortunately, look the part. Conversely, many units have leaders who step out in front, who demand high standards and the troops will almost always follow suit - and the unit will be successful in everything it attempts.

- **Followership** - all of us have a stake in the outcome of our unit’s efforts. From the airman basic to the four star general, we all must do our individual part to make out unit and our Air Force better. We should think about that every day as an individual. When a unit fails - everyone is a failure - when the unit succeeds, everyone in the unit is a success.

For the enlisted force of the future - we must understand that we are going through a culture change. That we are

becoming an air expeditionary force - no longer having a strong forward presence overseas. We must accept that we are going to be highly technical and more tactical in the future. Everyone must understand the vision, and how their individual AFSC fits into the core competencies. We must continue to develop "airmanship."

Sir, we have a lot of work to do. And while the challenges are many, I am happy to report that we have the best Air Force we have ever had. Our troops, especially our young troops, continue to amaze me at what they are able to do. We need to continue to push our quality of life strategy and provide them the support necessary to do their job. The vast majority work very hard every day, without complaint and without great expectations.

V/R

CMSAF Benken

Mac's Comment:

I hope everyone will read this twice.



Mac